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MONSTERS OF WELLINGTON FOREST

Lauren Pauley

The last rays of the sun danced across the grass, warming the four boys' faces as they ran, feet pounding against the ground. They followed their spindly shadows, nervous excitement flush on their faces. The grass sloped off, becoming a steep hill, and their feet accommodated, rushing them into the dangerous game of balance. They ran away from the sun, towards the dark forest ahead of them, until their legs slowed and they looked in awe at the dark giants towering above, panting for breath.

Without discussion, they formed a single-file line as they made their way into the dark brush, fear blossoming in their stomachs.

Warren Willoughby didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

"I don't like this," he told them, hugging his arms around himself. "We aren't supposed to go past the gate. What if there's..." He trailed off as the hundreds of things that could go wrong overwhelmed him, as the horrific stories filled his head. "I don't like this!" he repeated finally, an octave higher.

Jack, who was a few steps in front of him, sighed. He attempted to glance back at Warren without the others noticing, and gave him a sheepish grin. "It'll be okay, Warren," he muttered. "We're just looking."

Warren gazed at the back of his best friend's head, panic rising in his chest. "But what if there's a bear? Or a... Or what if we get caught? We'll all get detention." He paused, the horror of detention overtaking him. Detention meant trouble, and that meant disappointing Father, and it could only lead to

bad grades and failing and flunking out and living as a bum--

"If you're going to be such a baby about it, go back," called Heathrow from the front. "Last thing we need is a crybaby." He and Gendry snickered.

Jack turned again and gave him a pleading look. Warren, suddenly overcome with shame, looked at the ground. He didn't understand it. He and Jack had been the best of friends for two years. It was Jack that had comforted him in the long, lonely nights that began his boarding school tenure; Jack that had made him laugh when he was overcome by fear; Jack that had defended him from the other mean boys.

But, suddenly, they were eleven and things were different. Jack was becoming distant. He was suddenly obsessed with Heathrow and Gendry, two of the rudest boys in their year. He didn't want to read with Warren anymore, instead opting to spend his time in the lounge with them, snickering. He hardly ever ate with Warren at lunch, and usually only spoke to him in their room when it was just the two of them. Jack never told jokes anymore, or, at least, jokes that Warren understood.

He was coming to realize he didn't understand a lot of things. Warren had been looking forward to this Thursday evening the entire week, for Jack had promised him they would read together as they used to. He hardly dared to believe it--no Gendry or Heathrow? No pretenses? No disgusting jokes?--and, sure enough, Jack had entered their room just after six, a sheepish grin on his face.

"It's not like I'm leaving you for nothing," he had said defensively, at the crestfallen look on Warren's face, "really, I'm not. We're going exploring. I can't miss out on that."

"Ex--exploring where?"

"The forest," Jack had told him, an awe entering his eyes.

Warren had shuddered.

The forest was completely off-limits. It was dark and massive, located at the southern end of the campus, down a steep hill. The forest was infamous

to the students of Wellington's School for Boys because of its fearsome nature. Gruesome stories were told of the forest's monsters and creepers and horrors. It was said that the brave boys who ventured into the forest never returned.

At seven years old, all of the boys at Wellington's were terrified at the mere mention of the forest. The older boys spread stories of gawking monsters and sneaky witches, poisonous snakes and demonic birds, all flitting through the forest, waiting for their next victim. It was even whispered that the trees of the forest came alive and ate you whole. The young boys' nightmares became full of trees and darkness.

But now, at eleven, the forest seemed enticing. The danger, the thrill of the unknown, the fact that it was out-of-bounds seemed to be challenging them. The forest became an entity of bravery for the older boys, a taunt that beckoned to them.

That is, except for Warren. As he followed Jack into deeper darkness, he suppressed a shudder, hugging his arms more tightly around himself. Peeking back behind him, he caught a glimpse of the waning rays of sun, now only just visible as the trees overtook it. Their footsteps echoed in the silence of the forest, a quiet that seemed to deepen the further they went.

Warren wondered why he had insisted to go with Jack and his new friends. His heart was pounding so rapidly he feared it would burst. He knew it was to prove himself, but why had he chosen this particular occasion? He yearned for the refuge of his bed, the soft glow of his lamp that reflected onto the wall as he read a novel, the comforting familiarity of his blankets, the knowledge that tomorrow would begin and follow the exact routine as the previous day. As one of the boys stepped on a twig, the snap reverberated loudly and Warren flinched, looking around wildly.

"Have you seen anything?" Heathrow called back to them. He was leading their line with a confident swagger, a smirk ever-present upon his face.

They responded in the negative, and he chuckled, turning around and walking backwards. "I told you, it's all bullshit what they say. There's nothing

scary down here. They're all just too scared."

"Yeah, it's bull-shit," Jack agreed, trying the new word out on his tongue. Warren cringed.

Heathrow snickered at him openly. "What's wrong, never heard that word before?"

Warren felt a quaking fear in his chest but spoke anyway. "If it's all-- bullshit-- then how did everyone come up with those stories?" he had intended to sound defiant, but his trembling voice gave him away.

Heathrow and Gendry laughed. Jack made as though to laugh, then hesitated, and settled on staring at the trees around him instead.

"I mean it, guys," Warren said, "I think we should leave." He glanced behind again, and, sure enough, the sunlight was gone. "What if we get lost? Or hurt? Or--?"

"What if we get lost?" Gendry mimicked, earning himself a laugh from Heathrow, "Jeez, Jack, where'd you find this kid?"

Heathrow, who was smirking widely, stopped in his tracks and muttered something to Gendry. They laughed loudly. Warren stopped, too, folding his arms across his chest.

"I mean it, guys," he repeated, his stomach becoming an odd mixture of unease and humiliation, "let's--"

"Let's just keep going," Jack muttered hurriedly, shooting Warren a pointed look. But Warren had had enough. He felt his chest constricting with emotion.

"If you wanna leave, nothing's stopping you, you baby," Heathrow called to Warren. "No one wanted you here in the first place. You're the one that tagged along."

Warren felt his stomach drop. He looked to Jack, but he avoided Warren's gaze. As Heathrow and Gendry laughed, tears pricked at Warren's eyes.

"Sure, you can come," Jack had said when Warren had asked. Jack

had looked surprised, but slightly proud. “You can--it’ll be fun,” he had grinned, only the slightest bit of hesitation in his voice. For a moment, it had felt like old times, the way that their eyes met and shared a smile like it was the two of them against the rest of the world.

But that Jack was nothing like this Jack, the one that avoided Warren’s eyes and gave Heathrow and Gendry knowing looks, like they were all in on a secret that Warren didn’t know about. The Jack that made fun of others and didn’t ask Warren how he felt or how his day had gone. The Jack that suddenly seemed too grown up and mean, too good for Warren’s friendship.

Warren didn’t mean to, but he felt the tears on his cheeks, which only sent them into further peals of laughter. This time, Jack joined in, and that was the worst thing of all.

They were calling his name as he left, calling him a crybaby and a preschooler and everything in between, and he stumbled over twigs and leaves back the way they had come. Warren struggled to contain his sobs. He didn’t understand. He didn’t understand. What had happened? Why was he suddenly not enough? In his haste, as his mind went into overdrive, he hardly looked where he was going, taunts ringing in his ears.

Suddenly, the earth lurched beneath his feet as an enormous thud resonated around him. Warren lost his balance, tumbling backwards, losing his breath. A towering shadow loomed over him, and it was only with the deepest trenches of bravery within him that Warren managed to look up, whimpering, propping himself up on his elbows.

An enormous figure looked down at Warren, a hideous, ghastly creature with spindly limbs that reached toward him. It was the deepest, darkest shade of black, nearly blending in with the darkness surrounding them. But Warren gazed in horror at its heads. There were three of them, bald, round faces with red eyes--and they all laughed at him.

In shrill, screeching tones, they screamed at him, reminding him why Jack had

left him and why he was a failure and why he would end up as a bum, after all, disappointing Father--

When the other boys finally found Warren, he was sobbing, pointing up at the trees, crying about monsters and failures and wood. They stared at each other in confusion, glancing back and forth between Warren and where he was pointing. Frightened by his behavior, they tried to understand, but saw nothing except branches and bark. Yet the monster remained.